FROM THE BOOKSHELF #139 MAY 4, 1976
RHODA MAINES

A HERO IN HIS TIME BY ARTHUR COHEN

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU NOW ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES...FROM THE BOOKSHELF...A SERIES IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY RHODA MAINES' REPORT ON A HERO IN HIS TIME BY ARTHUR COHEN, PUBLISHED BY RANDOM HOUSE. HERE NOW IS YOUR BOOK EDITOR ---------.

EDITOR: A HERO IN HIS TIME IS ABOUT A RUSSIAN JEWISH POET AND THE CONFLICTS CREATED BY THE STATE'S DEMAND TO CONFORM AND HIS OWN NEED TO BE AN INDIVIDUAL. AT AGE 54, YURI ISAKOVSY HAS PUBLISHED NO POETRY FOR 16 YEARS. TO STAY ALIVE, TO ENDURE, HE BURIES POEMS IN HIS HEAD. HIS JOB FOR THE LAST 18 YEARS HAS BEEN TO EDIT AN OBSCURE JOURNAL OF FOLK MUSIC WITH A TINY STAFF OF THREE. ALTHOUGH THIS HELPS HIM AVOID THE ATTENTION OF THE AUTHORITIES, HE IS, NEVERTHELESS, SUBJECT TO THE CUSTOMARY SURVEILLANCE BY THE SECRET POLICE. HERE IS HOW YURI SEES THE SITUATION:

VOICE: "THE FIRST INSTINCT OF ANY WELL-TRAINED SOVIET IS TO BE SUSPICIOUS -- IN FACT, TO SUSPECT A PLOT TO ENTRAP HIM, TO CATCH HIM OUT SINGING THE AMERICAN NATIONAL ANTHEM, RUSHING TO CHANGE RUBLES INTO DOLLARS ON THE BLACK MARKET... THE CONVICTION THAT EVERY OFFICE IN THE SOVIET UNION HAD ITS OWN SECURITY POLICE DID NOT DIMINISH WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT ONE'S OFFICE HAS ONLY THREE INHABITANTS. IT SIMPLY MEANT THAT ONE'S SUSPICIONS NEED NOT EXTEND BEYOND THE OBVIOUS..."

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EDITOR: YURI'S SHREWD FORESIGHT AND SENSE OF HUMOR SEE HIM THROUGH. HE KNOWS THE SMALL TIME SPIES WATCHING HIM AND AT TIMES HE DELIBERATELY MAKES AN OCCASIONAL MISTAKE FOR THEM TO REPORT, BUT NEVER A SERIOUS ONE. ONCE, YURI RECEIVED THE COMPLETE WRITINGS OF STALIN AS A PRESENT. HE LEFT THEM WRAPPED IN TISSUE PAPER. THEN ONE DAY FRIENDS PLAN TO VISIT HIM, AND HE REALIZES IT MAY BE DANGEROUS TO HAVE ALL THOSE CLEAN, UNREAD BOOKS ON THE SHELVES, ESPECIALLY WHEN JUST BENEATH THEM ARE MUCH USED ANTHOLOGIES OF AMERICAN AND ENGLISH POETRY. SO HE QUICKLY DECIDES TO ANNOTATE THE STALIN EDITIONS BY PENCILING IN SUCH PROFOUND COMMENTS AS "SPLENDED," "WELL-SAID," "TO THE POINT." TO MAKE ABSOLUTELY SURE OF NOT AROUSING SUSPICION, HE SPILLS A LITTLE COFFEE ON AN OCCASIONAL PAGE AND RETURNS THE VOLUMES TO THE SHELF.

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ANOTHER TIME, YURI DECIDES THAT THE FACT HE IS JEWISH IS TOO DANGEROUS, SO HE SUBMITS TO THE CONVERSION RITUAL OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH. THIS CONSUMING PASSION FOR SURVIVAL CREATES A REAL DANGER THAT YURI'S WHOLE LIFE WILL BE NOTHING BUT A CRASS DECEPTION. YURI HAS THE SOUL OF A POET, BUT NOT THE COURAGE TO EXPRESS, UNDER THE PRESSURES OF THE REGIME, THAT ARTISTIC INTEGRITY WHICH BEING A POET DEMANDS. ONLY POETS WHO HAVE SOLD OUT TO THE STATE REAP THE BENEFITS OF SUCCESS AND, AS YURI IS ONLY TOO WEEL AWARE, SUCH POETS ARE SUPERFLUOUS.

BUT THEN YURI FINDS HIS HERO IN YASHA TYUTYCHEV, AN ELDERLY, IMPOVERISHED AND ECCENTRIC COLLECTOR OF FOLK

EDITOR: (CONT'D) SONGS. GATHERING SOURCE MATERIAL IN THE STALINIST DAYS, YASHA ASSOCIATED WITH SOME CHARACTERS CONSIDERED SUBVERSIVE BY THE STATE. ONE DAY, AS THEY ARE SINGING FOLK SONGS TO HIM, HE IS ARRESTED BY THE SECRET POLICE AND SENTENCED TO THIRTEEN YEARS IN SIBERIAN PRISON CAMPS. AFTER BEING FREED, HOWEVER, TYUTCHEV BOUNCES BACK WITH UNDIMINISHED ZEAL FOR HIS ART DESPITE ALL THE PERSECUTION AND SUFFERING HE HAS UNDERGONE. YURI WONDERS HOW SUCH AN OUT-OF-STEP MADMAN CAN FLOUT ALL THE RULES AND PUT HIMSELF CONSTANTLY IN DANGER. GRADUALLY YASHA BECOMES FOR YURI THE MODEL OF THE POSSIBILITY OF FREEDOM AND SELF-RESPECT.

THE BOOK'S KEY EPISODE OCCURS ONE DAY IN 1972 WHEN YURI IS CALLED BY A KREMLIN BUREAUCRAT AND INFORMED TO HIS IMMENSE SURPRISE THAT HE HAS BEEN CHOSEN TO TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES AS SOVIET REPRESENTATIVE OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF MUSIC AND ETHNOLOGY. HIS NERVOUSNESS BECOMES REAL FEAR WHEN HE FINDS THAT HIS APPOINTMENT INVOLVES READING A POEM IN PUBLIC THAT WILL TRANSMIT A SECRET MESSAGE -- CONCEALED IN THE POEM -- FROM THE KGB TO ONE OF ITS AGENTS.

AN OFFICIAL INFORMS HIM THAT IT IS AN OPTIMISTIC, HOPEFUL POEM WHICH, ALTHOUGH COMPOSED BY A COMPUTER, HE SHOULD BE PROUD TO READ. BUT YURI'S SPIRITS ARE NOT EXACTLY CALMED BY THIS NEWS. HE MUSES TO HIMSELF:

VOICE: "...WHY SHOULD HE AMONG SOVIET MUSICOLOGISTS -- A MERE EDITOR, LET US SAY IT, AN EDITOR OF NO PARTICULAR PASSION OR INTEREST IN THE MUSIC TRADITIONS OF HIS COUNTRY, IN MUSIC EVEN, BE CHOSEN? THERE HE IS, A MINOR, NEGLECTED POET, A JEW OF UNSTABLE CHEMISTRY, WITHOUT FAMILY AND CHILDREN, BEING ALLOWED TO WANDER ABROAD, WHERE EVERY SOVIET CITIZEN AND MOST ASSUREDLY EVERY SOVIET JEW... IS INVITED TO DEFECT FROM HIS HOMELAND..."

EDITOR: BUT OFF HE GOES IN THE COMPANY, OF A CRIPPLED, FREE-LANCE INFORMER ASSIGNED ESPECIALLY TO HIM AND A SMUG GOVERNMENT APPROVED POET WHO IS TO BE HONORED BY AMERICAN PUBLISHERS AND WRITERS.

ALTHOUGH YURI'S STAY IN AMERICA IS SHORT, IT IS NOT UNEVENTFUL. THE FIRST THING THAT HAPPENS IS THAT AN AMERICAN WOMAN JOURNALIST FALLS IN LOVE WITH HIM. THROUGH HER, HE MIXES WITH THE LITERATI AND LEARNS THAT THERE ARE WAYS IN THE WEST, TOO, TO INFLUENCE AND CORRUPT ARTISTS. INSTEAD OF SPIES AND THE THREAT OF ARREST, SUBTLE BRIBES CAN SERVE THE SAME PURPOSE. IF AN AUTHOR DOES NOT WRITE FOR THE BUYING PUBLIC, NO MATTER HOW GOOD HE IS, HE MAY NOT BE READ, MAY NOT EVEN BE PUBLISHED. IN THE SOVIET UNION, THE PRESSURES ARE MORE DIRECT; ONE FINDS DIFFICULTY IN FINDING EMPLOYMENT; OR IN MORE OBSTINATE CASES, HE IS HARRASSED BY THE SECRET POLICE, SENT TO A PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL OR PUT IN JAIL. IN AMERICA, YURI DISCOVERS, IF YOUR POEMS ARE PUT TO MUSIC, YOU MAY BECOME A ROCK STAR.

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EDITOR: (CONT'D) IN THE MEANTIME, YURI HAS BEEN WORKING UP TO A CRUCIAL DECISION. HE SIMPLY CANNOT BRING HIMSELF TO READ SUCH A TERRIBLE POEM AS IT IS WRITTEN. SO HE DECIDES TO REWRITE IT, KNOWING FULL WELL THAT THE SECRET MESSAGE IT CONTAINS WILL BE DESTROYED. BUT AT LEAST HE WILL HAVE THE SATISFACTION OF READING A POEM THAT ISN'T BAD. HIS NEWLY-FOUND AMERICAN LADY-FRIEND BEGS HIM TO DEFECT, BUT YURI REFUSES. HE IS DETERMINED TO GO BACK TO HIS COUNTRY, KNOWING WHAT IN ALL PROBABILITY AWAITS HIM. BUT AFTER ALL, WAS IT NOT HIS COUNTRY THAT BROUGHT FORTH MEN LIKE YASHA TYUTCHEV? AND THAT IS HOW YURI ISAKOVSKY, DESPITE HIS OBSCURITY, BECOMES, AS THE AUTHOR'S TITLE SUGGESTS, A HERO IN HIS OWN TIME.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REPORT ON A HERO IN HIS OWN TIME BY ARTHUR COHEN. AND NOW AN INVITATION TO JOIN US NEXT WEEK WHEN THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER REPORT ON A BOOK AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING.... FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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